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Ovidian Pictures and  
“The Rules and Compasses”  
of Criticism

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The decorum of the moderns, generally implied rather than expressed — for the word itself is now considered indecorous — has condemned or refused to take seriously much that was sanctioned by ancient and Renaissance writers and painters. If we are to approach these works with the sympathetic understanding they deserve, we have to respond to them with a sense of the decorum which they respect and which no longer obtains in the modern world. My examples — and this paper is no more than a plea for what needs to be done for the sake of some great works of art — will be confined to the *Venus and Adonis* of Shakespeare and its parallels in the visual arts.

Decorum is a more subtle thing than any rules; the general notion of what it is for any era is not enough to create the right appreciation of such works as Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*. For, in the fullest sense of the word, with each work of art a new kind of decorum is born; each recreates, as well as observes, the ideal of decorum.

My reference here to “the rules” echoes my title. I have borrowed the part in quotation marks — “the rules and compasses” of criticism — from Laurence Sterne, who in *Tristram Shandy* satirizes the standards evoked by ignorant critics, who unwittingly deny the essence of decorum by too literal an adherence to the rules when they judge

individual works of art.<sup>1</sup> That is a sure way to defeat poetry, both in literature and in painting, where we need above all to seek, as Thomas Wilson the sixteenth-century rhetorician said, "some thing that pertaineth . . . to the knowledge of the trueth" or "to the setting forth of Natures work."<sup>2</sup>

As a partial context for my immediate examples, I would refer to the decorum of Ovid. In the Renaissance, his *Metamorphoses* might be viewed as breaking Aristotle's "rules," much as writers of romance epics, such as Ariosto, were breaking them. Giraldis Cinthio, however, in his essay *On Romances*, notes that a poet is given the same power as a painter, namely, he says, the power "of varying likenesses according to his own judgment as appears to him most to his purpose."<sup>3</sup> He cites the example of Ovid, who "laid aside . . . the laws of Vergil and Homer and did not follow the laws of Aristotle given us in his *Poetics*. . . . This happened because he devoted himself to the writings of matter for which rules and examples did not exist, just as there were no materials on our Romances."<sup>4</sup> This defense of the poet's power to invent according to his purpose goes right to the heart of decorum. Ovid did not hesitate to begin the *Metamorphoses* with the beginning of the world, "delivering himself," says Cinthio, "with admirable skill from Aristotle's laws of art" — Aristotle who advocated beginning *in medias res* in order to create a unified action.<sup>5</sup> But we should define our art, not by arbitrary rules, but by the practice of great artists, just as Aristotle himself did. That, in essence, is Cinthio's defense of the Italian epic poets.

For modern critics of Ovid, the problem has similarly been to define his relationship to the epic tradition and, in so doing, identify his purpose in the *Metamorphoses*. According to his own statement of purpose, at the beginning of his poem, he will deal with the history of the world from the beginning to the present, and his theme will be change. Now this theme itself precludes epic unity and at the same time invites a tone not unlike Montaigne's who, in his *Essays*, was also dealing with change: "I cannot fix my subject," he says. Montaigne of course was not alluding to epic tradition, as Ovid was,

<sup>1</sup> Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, ed. Graham Petrie (Harmondsworth 1967), p. 193.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Wilson, *Arte of Rhetorique* (1560), ed. G. H. Mair (Oxford 1901), p. 195.

<sup>3</sup> Giraldis Cinthio, *On Romances*, selections in *Literary Criticism: Plato to Dryden*, ed. A. H. Gilbert (New York 1940), p. 269.

<sup>4</sup> Giraldis Cinthio, *On Romances*, trans. Henry L. Snuggs (Lexington, Kentucky 1968), pp. 40-41.

<sup>5</sup> The phrase occurs of course in Horace's *Ars Poetica* 148-49, but cf. Aristotle, *Poetics*, chapter 23.

and hence needed no other unity than the unity of his speaking voice, talking about himself.

For Ovid, various critics have gone to great lengths to show a structural pattern in his poem, and in the earnest pursuit of this goal have done less than justice to the uniqueness of his tone. His seeming objectivity of narration does not preclude his absolute control over his materials. He is there, at our elbow so to speak, commenting not only indirectly, by his mode of description, but also directly, by interjection. When telling the story of Narcissus, for example, he sounds rather like Philostratus, who cannot help addressing figures in the pictures he describes; so Ovid says to Narcissus: "Why try to catch an always fleeting image, / Poor credulous youngster? What you seek is nowhere. . . ."<sup>6</sup> Such interjections belong, and are entirely fitting, to the poet's apparent naiveté of description, that delight in pictorial detail which made him an inspiration to poets and painters alike.

If the older critics, such as Brooks Otis, have been more concerned with placing Ovid in the context of literary history and defining his genre, Richard Lanham, a leading light among rhetorical critics of the present day, denies Ovid any serious purpose at all. This poet, he contends, is "rhetorical man," for whom style is all and content nothing.<sup>7</sup> By means of this approach, Lanham effectively performs a surgical operation, removing any suggestion of heart from Ovid's playfulness.

The real task of the critic of Ovid, however, is to recognize all that his humor implies: sympathy as well as detachment. Could one not see the poet's genius as directing him to turn the ancient myths into an imitation of nature — in other words, to find and show forth the truth of these fantastic tales? It is this achievement that surely made the *Metamorphoses* a bible for Renaissance poets and painters — something a hollow style could never do.

Let us turn to Titian for an example of faithfulness to Ovid's spirit, rather than the imitation which only copies. In illustrated editions of Ovid, the story of Venus and Adonis is represented usually by one of two scenes: the embrace of the lovers, or Venus' lamentation over the dead Adonis — or a combination of the two [Figures 1, 2, 3]. It is noteworthy that these prints represent only one moment of the story at a time, unlike Titian's great painting which concentrates

<sup>6</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Rolfe Humphries (Bloomington, Indiana 1964), III, 432-33. English translations of the *Metamorphoses* are taken from this edition. Cf. also Philostratus, *Imagines* I. 23.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Lanham, *Motives of Eloquence* (New Haven 1976), pp. 48-64.

into one moment the before and after as well [Figure 4]. Dramatically, his picture captures just that tension between the lovers that is implicit in Ovid's account, though not developed. This tension is implicit, for example, in the fact that Venus was driven by love to change her own nature when she went hunting with Adonis and that, though she warned him against hunting the boar, he insisted on doing so. Yet Titian, despite his truth to Ovid, received some criticism in his own time for "depicting Adonis fleeing from Venus, who is shown in the act of embracing him, whereas he very much desired her embraces."<sup>8</sup> A similar demand for a precedent lies behind present day inquiries into the origins of Shakespeare's depiction of a "reluctant Adonis."

Criticism, even "iconographic," which attaches itself to a supposed deviation from the text is based on a false notion of imitation, rather like the tyranny of the Ciceronian style which Erasmus rightly attacked because, as he said, the true imitation of Cicero consists in absorbing his spirit, not in copying details of his style.<sup>9</sup>

For a more grateful response to Titian's painting, we may turn to Lodovico Dolce's famous letter to Alessandro Contarini. He first describes the almost feminine beauty of Adonis, then his expression: "He turns his face towards Venus with lively and smiling eyes, sweetly parting two lips of rose, or indeed live coral; and one has the impression that with wanton and amorous endearments he is comforting Venus into not being afraid." Next, Dolce describes the beauty of Venus, with her back turned — "not for want of art . . . but to display art in double measure" — then proceeds to her expression: "Similarly her look corresponds to the way one must believe that Venus would have looked if she ever existed; there appear in it evident signs of the fear she was feeling in her heart, in view of the unhappy end to which the young man came."<sup>10</sup> Far from deviating from Ovid's story, in Dolce's view Titian has succeeded in making visible the living truth of that story.

If now we look at some other representations, we may agree that Titian is truer in his characterization of Ovid's figures than, for example, Spranger or artists of the School of Fontainebleau [Figures

<sup>8</sup> See R. W. Lee, *Ut Pictura Poesis: The Humanistic Theory of Painting* (New York 1967), p. 44, and Erwin Panofsky, *Problems in Titian, Mostly Iconographic* (New York 1969), p. 151, note 36.

<sup>9</sup> See Erasmus, *Ciceronianus* (1528), trans. Izora Scott (New York 1908), pp. 81-82. See also Thomas M. Greene, *The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry* (New Haven 1982), pp. 183-85.

<sup>10</sup> Lodovico Dolce, letter to Alessandro Contarini, in Mark Roskill, *Dolce's "Aretino" and Venetian Art Theory of the Cinquecento* (New York 1968), pp. 213-15.

5, 6]. He makes his picture tell the whole of the story, whereas the lesser painters illustrate only one scene, like the illustrated editions of Ovid, but of course with more elaborateness and, sometimes, grace.

If most people would agree that Titian's is a great painting, the same cannot be said of modern criticism of Shakespeare's poem on the subject. Evidently, the sensuous beauties of the picture carry an appeal that the conspicuously rhetorical qualities of the poem do not. Recent parallels drawn between the two have been mainly concerned with the so-called iconographic similarity, with even the suggestion of a possible influence from Titian, or prints after Titian, on Shakespeare.<sup>11</sup> But in fact their treatment is not identical: in Titian's painting, we see a fondness in the glance Adonis exchanges with Venus, as if he were sorry to leave her; Shakespeare, on the other hand, polarizes the relationship, making it one of opposition and conflict. Each artist has found and expressed one part of the truth in Ovid's tale.

Yet if I were to draw a composite portrait of contemporary criticism of Shakespeare's poem, I would have to show a continued lack of appreciation for it, based either on psychoanalytic grounds or on rhetorical grounds.

The two approaches may even be combined, as if to confirm doubly the impossibility that we as readers can sympathize with either of the characters. In the words of one critic, when Venus says that with the death of Adonis, "Beauty is dead," this is not true for us; it is not beauty that is dead but rather "self-love."<sup>12</sup> It appears not only that Adonis is narcissistic, but that he actually deserved to die: "The allegory of Adonis's death seems clear. He is punished for an empty heart."<sup>13</sup> But if we read the poem as mimetic narrative, which this critic refuses to do, we must see Adonis through the eyes of Venus and must believe that he *is* beauty, that with him beauty dies. Though she alludes to Narcissus in her arguments with Adonis, we have to remember that no one had yet invented the concept of narcissism.<sup>14</sup> Venus was not psychoanalyzing Adonis but trying to persuade him to love, which is exactly her role in the world: "O,

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Panofsky, *Problems in Titian*, pp. 153-54.

<sup>12</sup> Lanham, p. 93.

<sup>13</sup> Lanham, p. 92.

<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, Freud distinguishes between the narcissistic man and the man of action on the grounds that the latter "will never give up the external world on which he can try out his strength." Adonis is surely intent on proving himself the man of action. See *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. Joan Riviere, in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London 1953), XXI, pp. 83-84.

learn to love; the lesson is but plain, / And once made perfect, never lost again" (407-08). In one of her arguments with Adonis, she herself echoes the words Ovid's Narcissus addressed to himself: "Why do you tease me so? Where do you go / When I am reaching for you? I am surely / Neither so old or ugly as to scare you, / And nymphs have been in love with me" (III. 454-56). Compare this with the words of Shakespeare's Venus:

I have been wooed as I entreat thee now,  
Even by the stern and direful god of war. . . .  
Were I hard-favour'd, foul, or wrinkled-old,  
Ill-nurtured, crooked, churlish, harsh in voice . . .  
Then mightst thou pause, for then I were not for thee,  
But having no defects, why dost abhor me?  
(vv. 97-98 and 133-34, 137-38)

But neither Shakespeare's Venus nor his Adonis suffers from Narcissus' particular form of tragedy. Adonis' love is not for himself but for hunting: "I know not love . . . nor will not know it, / Unless it be a boar, and then I chase it" (vv. 409-10).

Lack of sympathy with Adonis has been evenly matched with lack of sympathy for Venus herself. Her desire gives her the strength and courage to pluck Adonis from his horse and carry him under one arm; when she has him down on the ground, "Her face doth reek and smoke, her blood doth boil, / And careless lust stirs up a desperate courage" (vv. 555-56). Can this possibly be "the golden Aphrodite?" asks C. S. Lewis in bewilderment, forgetting momentarily that love has its ridiculous, as well as sublime, side.<sup>15</sup> Beautiful as Titian's Venus is, she too has something of the ridiculous in her pose. But who else but Venus could continue to look beautiful in such an ungraceful position, as she tries to hold back Adonis? Shakespeare, similarly, has seen what love is when it comes down to earth, and he can smile, as his critics seem unable to do.

This brings me to the rhetorical approach to the poem. Curiously, critics who profess to take this approach generally deny the poem any mimetic intention; instead, they treat the mimesis as a strategy for upsetting narrative expectations. The poet pretends to be telling a straightforward story but at every turn is forcing us to examine the "rhetoric of love" by manipulating three different rhetorics within the poem: the narrator's, Venus', Adonis'. And outside all these, pulling the strings, is Shakespeare the puppeteer.<sup>16</sup> The rhetoric then is not simply for pleasure, though that is there, but for revealing

<sup>15</sup> C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* (Oxford 1954), p. 499.

<sup>16</sup> Lanham, pp. 84-90.



love itself to be a subspecies of rhetoric. Now this argument is so sophisticated that it almost dazzles us into acceptance of both its premises and conclusions. Treating rhetoric as a game, like life itself, it gives due weight to the opposing points of view in the poem; it recognizes that Venus and Adonis have both a mythic character and a dramatic character, and that there may be a comic contrast between the two, as if the larger-than-life personages suddenly came down to earth and were like other people — something that, by the way, is in Ovid as well. Where I part company with this approach is in the conclusion drawn: "It [the poem] teaches seriously, but what it teaches is the suicidal incompleteness of seriousness, of the tragic Adonis-like self."<sup>17</sup> How the comedy of Adonis can turn into "the suicidal incompleteness of seriousness" is difficult to understand. His boyish resistance is characterized in such lines as: "Give me my hand . . . why dost thou feel it?" To which Venus replies, "Give me my heart . . . and thou shalt have it" (vv. 373-74). Neither Venus nor Adonis persuades us, as readers, to accept a particular point of view. What we see, rather, is the life and humor of their debate. This is not the same as saying that the poem is characterized by "ambivalence," that favorite critical term of today, with its implication that there are no longer any accepted values to which the poet can point.

Given the fashionableness of "ambivalence" and the fact that it carries connotations of a new kind of value and truth, it is little wonder that decorum has become a dead issue. Lanham may again stand for the modern rhetorician when he says that when "we call a style inappropriate, we mean that we don't like the reality it creates."<sup>18</sup> But Renaissance writers do not talk this way about decorum; rather they speak of the seemliness of suiting style to subject matter, picture to setting, everything to the occasion, just as dress and behavior should be appropriate — what George Puttenham, picking up on the beautiful in the word, calls "This louely conformitie, or proportion, or conueniencie betweene the sence and the sensible."<sup>19</sup> He goes on to say that nature herself has observed this conformity in her own works. But surely this nature is the very objective reality the moderns reject; and the idea of decorum, and the link which Puttenham and others made between decorum and morality, has to fall by the wayside, along with other "positivistic" notions. If used at all today, the word will have a very limited sense of expectations fulfilled or disappointed;

<sup>17</sup> Lanham, p. 94.

<sup>18</sup> Lanham, p. 28.

<sup>19</sup> George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie* (1588), ed. G. D. Willcock and Alice Walker (Cambridge 1936), p. 262.

it will not allude to an ultimate standard of what is fitting. For this reason, decorum is no longer popular either as a critical term or as a standard of behavior. And yet Milton went so far as to call decorum "the grand masterpiece to observe," and in so doing summed up the view of ancient and Renaissance rhetoric.<sup>20</sup>

When Shakespeare and Titian chose to represent the story of Venus and Adonis, they had in mind the pleasures of a *copia* on the Ovidian tale. They did not have a narrow concept of entertainment. There is a heart behind their smiling. For both, the picture they present is its own best commentary. When judged by any other standard — and here only our own deficiencies in a sense of decorum stand revealed — they may appear lacking in greatness. We no longer make an obvious demand that a poet or painter follow the letter of his text, as Raffaello Borghini demanded of Titian, but we can be equally demanding in requiring that an artist prove he is an artist by *not* imitating nature. He must distort; he must break up the very idea of accepted beauties. If Shakespeare's poem is allowed any merit today, apparently it must be on the basis of his assumed satire of the rhetoric of both Venus and Adonis. As for Titian, he as a painter is allowed some degree of mimesis, but it is not this that interests his commentators; it is either his iconography or his technique. Who today would dream of giving an appreciation of his painting such as Dolce's?

And so I return to Laurence Sterne's salutary remarks, as true now as when he wrote them down. After making fun of the "cant of criticism," he says that he would go fifty miles on foot

to kiss the hand of that man whose generous heart will give up the reins of his imagination into his author's hands — be pleased he knows not why, and cares not wherefore.

Great Apollo, if thou art in a giving humour — give me, — I ask no more, but one stroke of native humour, with a single spark of thy own fire along with it, — and send Mercury with the *rules and compasses*, if he can be spared, with my compliments to — no matter.<sup>21</sup>

Could we revive the notion of a decorum that does not reside in rules only? It seems all but impossible, given the relationship the word implies to a propriety of life, as well as of art.<sup>22</sup> But this propriety rests upon an exquisite sense of tact, a grace which cannot be taught.

<sup>20</sup> Milton, *Of Education*, in *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York 1957), p. 637.

<sup>21</sup> Sterne, p. 193.

<sup>22</sup> See Cicero, *De Officiis*, I. 27, where he says that decorum cannot be separated from moral goodness.



I like to think that Shakespeare's line at the end of *Love's Labor's Lost* alludes to the same freedom that Sterne was praising: "The words of Mercury are harsh after the songs of Apollo."

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Figure 1. Lodovico Dolce, *Le Trasformatiōni*, Venice, 1561, Canto 21, p. 224. The plate includes, besides the embrace of the lovers, the birth of Adonis and the race of Atalanta and Hippomenes.



Figure 2. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Frankfort, 1581, X, Chapter 15, p. 138<sup>v</sup>.



Figure 3. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Venice, 1517, X, sig. CX<sup>v</sup>. The plate shows the birth of Adonis from the myrtle tree, the embrace of the lovers, and the killing of Adonis by the boar, with Venus overhead, mourning her beloved. It also includes, as a prologue on the left, the pursuit of Myrrha by her father Cinyras.





Figure 4. Titian, *Venus and Adonis*, Prado, Madrid, 1554.





Figure 5. Bartholomaeus Spranger, *Venus and Adonis*, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, c. 1595.



Figure 6. Master L.D. (Leon Darent?), *The Death of Adonis*, British Museum, mid-sixteenth century.